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8TH DISTRICT, FLORIDA

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CONGRESSMAN RIC KELLER'S STATEMENT TO THE CARES
COMMISSION
SEPTEMBER 10, 2003

Good morning, Commissioners. My name is Ric Keller. I am the United States Congressman for the 8th Congressional District of Florida, which covers the greater Orlando area and includes portions of Orange County, Lake County, Marion County, and Osceola County.

I am here today to voice my strong support for a new veterans hospital in Orlando. There are over 380,000 veterans in the Central Florida area, and Orlando is the largest metropolitan area in the United States without a VA hospital.

The Orlando hospital site benefits the greatest number of veterans, it is the easiest VA health care facility to upgrade to a hospital and it already has the Central Energy Plant needed to meet the emergency energy needs of a VA hospital.

For these reasons, it is no surprise that the VA recommended that Orlando be one of only two cities in the U.S. to receive a new veterans hospital. Specifically, the VA's draft national CARES plan forwarded to your commission on August 4, 2003, concluded that, after exhaustive study, "Orlando is the logical choice" for a new VA hospital.

Building a new VA hospital in Orlando will dramatically improve the lives of Central Florida veterans in two ways. First, it will eliminate the hardship of having to make a two-hour ride to the nearest VA hospital in Tampa.

The existing VA health care center in Orlando does not perform surgeries which require overnight stays, such as gallbladder surgeries or appendectomies. Similarly, they do not provide cancer care, or kidney dialysis. All of these things require treatment two hours away in Tampa, and results in our veterans being separated from their families and support systems at a time when they need them the most.

Second, a new Orlando veterans hospital, along with the proposed expansion of clinical space, will dramatically shorten the waiting time for veterans with non-emergency medical needs to get a doctors appointment from six months down to two weeks.

However, in the interest of straight talk, let me say to you that there are some who suggest that perhaps the VA hospital should instead be in Brevard County. Let me squarely address this issue with you.

There are three strong reasons why a new VA hospital should be placed in Orlando, as opposed to Brevard County.

First, Orange County has more veterans than Brevard County, and will continue to have more veterans than Brevard County in the future. There are more than 380,000 veterans living in the 7 counties which make up Central Florida, and no county has more veterans than Orange County. VA studies show that the Orlando site is more accessible to Central Florida veterans than the Brevard site.

Second, it is much easier to expand the existing VA Health Care Center in Orlando into a hospital, than it is to convert the small outpatient clinic in Brevard into a hospital. For example, Orlando was formerly a 150 bed Naval hospital, so it's much easier to reactivate the acute care support functions. It has a 24-hour presence, it has a nursing home, it has domiciliary facilities, and it has emergency room capabilities. Brevard has none of these things.

Third, the Orlando health care center has a central energy plant, with expansion capability, and it currently has 24-hour a day back-up generators. So, for example, if the recent electricity blackouts which occurred in the Northeast United States were to happen in Central Florida, all of the oxygen tanks, respiratory equipment, and other vital equipment in the hospital would continue to work because of these generators and central energy plant. In contrast, Brevard merely has the regular business occupancy air conditioning system, with no such energy plant or expansion capability.

In short, building a new VA hospital in Orlando would benefit the entire Central Florida veteran community, including Brevard County. For example, veterans in Brevard County currently have to travel over 2 1/2 hours to the Tampa hospital. Under this plan, many will travel to a much closer site in Orlando less than an hour away.

Someone once said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. Well, ten years ago, there was a great deal of territorial bickering over the potential site of a new VA hospital. The end result was that no VA hospital was built, and all Central Florida veterans suffered. Let us learn from that experience and build this hospital right where the VA says it should be built: Orlando, Florida.

For these reasons, I urge you to submit the CARES Commission plan to Secretary Principi on November 30, 2003, with the recommendation intact that Orlando be the site of a new VA hospital. Thank you.